

The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy

A Review

[Ezra MacVie](#)

by Adam Tooze, Viking Press, New York, 2006. 799pp.

It is a well-worn truism that hunger is a weapon in war, and starvation may claim more victims in war than disease, cold, and the stupendous efforts of each side to kill members of the other side. But in mortal struggles between nations and their respective peoples, hunger and allied deprivations are also an “enemy within”—a consequence of the logic that he who fights cannot farm, nor bring fuel, nor administer medicine. The unforgiving logistics of life on earth become cruel and wrenching when masses seek to avoid—or impose—subjugation by or upon other masses.

But in the late 1930s, Hitler, for whose perspicacity Author Tooze allows considerable respect to shine through his text, saw that his Germany might face annihilation between the jaws of a vise formed on the west by the victorious Allies of World War I and by the nascent Soviet Union on the east. He details vividly how Hitler saw Germany’s salvation in that very land mass lying to the east of Germany that was occupied chiefly by the same golom of communism that formed the belligerent jaw, so to speak, of the vise. What he saw as the covert motivator of both jaws of this vise was International Jewry, as Tooze makes abundantly clear in his narrative.

Tooze never comments on the effective truth of Hitler’s concerns regarding International Jewry as the enemy of Germany’s “Aryan” civilization, nor does he explore any history bearing on its validity. He is a historian chronicling what amounts, at least in one view, to a titanic industrial contest between Germany and its occupied and allied countries on the one hand and Britain, the US, and the USSR and their allied countries on the other.

And this scope is tantalizingly narrow, in even more ways than already suggested. His subject is *Grossdeutschland*, to the essential exclusion of those powers arrayed against it. At various points, he refers, evidently with care as to sources, to comparative aspects in those realms opposed to Germany, but I was frustrated that his scope did not encompass those realms more extensively. If it had, the resultant work would have been massive, not only posing a multi-thousand-page challenge to readers, but also consuming no doubt the entire career of any economic historian who undertook it to a level of care and precision such as that embodied in the present work. Of course, depth of coverage might have been attenuated somewhat from that of the present work to allow both readers and the historian brief respites in which, say, to visit their families or attend to other personal affairs.

Most readers of this book, and of this review, have never experienced life in a place facing invasion and conquest by a neighboring power viewed as hostile not only by the regime currently in command of the locality, but very deeply and realistically by the great majority of the populace itself. Even without blockades, rationing, conscription, and third-dimension intrusions such as aerial bombing, the experience must be beyond harrowing. In at least some areas “overrun” by Germany such as the Ukraine and Alsace-Lorraine, a substantial portion of the populace welcomed the German hegemony. But the Red Army was properly viewed with horror by Germans facing the prospect of occupation by it,

and Germans further west viewed vengeful French occupiers with similar fears. Those Germans living in areas since given over to Poland and the Czech Republic could only dimly envision the horrors in store for them.

The upshot of this, coupled with the Allies' fearsome insistence on "unconditional surrender" goaded the energetic, ingenious population of Germany to prodigious exertions to escape the fate that defeat would—and did—bring them. And for any among them not quite sufficiently motivated by these factors, there was always the SS, whose coercive enterprise did not even pause at the point where their pervasive spying crossed over into what might be called "active persuasion."

Tooze portrays all this misery with impact that is most remarkable in a work that seems in almost every way to conform scrupulously with the very highest standards of scholastic accuracy. The one exception—and its role is actually quite minor in the context of the central issues addressed in his work—concerns National Socialist racial policy.

Tooze conforms very particularly with the regnant diktat bearing on historians to support the notion that the German state enacted a policy to exterminate the Jews of Europe. Such recitation, which the author undertakes largely without benefit of citation, may be a *sine qua non* of eminence in his chosen field. Regardless, he neither unduly belabors his occasional explicit references to gas-chamber-extermination programs, nor does he waste words or readers' attentions upon the enormity of such allegations. He recites them, at a number of points quite sufficient to support the notion that he believes them sincerely, and otherwise seems to consign them to the irrelevance that they deserve with reference to his declared subject—the efforts the Third Reich undertook, first to launch, then to defend against defeat in, what may be viewed in retrospect as its war of survival.

But he does not in the least ignore the fascinating subject of the role of slave labor, and its ugly cousin, forced labor, on the Third Reich's struggle for survival. To the contrary, though the chapter that most focuses on it has a title that includes the word "genocide," he explores this subject with admirable detachment that permits the illumination of a horrific subject such as would not be possible for a more-interested chronicler. He details how the growing need to exploit labor ultimately clashed with idealism to yield a slightly more "humanitarian" outcome not only for the racially disfavored, but even for prisoners of war, who had only a short time previously been in unsupportable surplus.

Humanitarianism, unfortunately, was in short supply in this realm beset by that most unhumanitarian of enterprises, total war. From the outset, as Tooze details, planners of the military initiatives set forth expectations of mass starvation, chiefly in the regions to Germany's east, which ironically encompassed Europe's "breadbasket," the Ukraine and Belarus. Those sowing and harvesting this grain were to be allowed sufficient nutrition to sustain life, if possible to the following season, but those constituting the region's urban populations were not to be fed. Germany's political apparatus quickly imposed on the situation an explicit and well advertised hierarchy that began with the declaration that no German should under any circumstances go hungry, and proceeded downward from there to the bottom, occupied by the Jews, who were to receive nothing at any time, slated as they were at that time for elimination.

These monstrous but, as the author makes clear, actually inadvertent conditions were prevented from becoming full realities by two factors, one early and quick, the other late and gradual. The first break for the hapless humanity so caught in the jaws of war was a bumper crop in 1939-40, and a better-than-

average one the following year. The second counterpressure encountered by the scenario came later in the war, when Jewish men and women were conscripted in large numbers for war-production labor, and had to be fed and cared for at least sufficiently for them to continue to produce. Lesser happenstances also interceded on a sporadic basis to spare various sectors the full brunt of these conditions, but countless millions died lingering, miserable deaths from hunger and disease.

In all the fighting, slaving, and starving, inexorably the finger of fate came around to point squarely at the Germans. The SS, increasingly deployed to recruit, deliver, and then coerce foreign workers of all kinds—prisoners of war, concentration-camp inmates, and simple conscripts—began in the war's last wracking year to be directed against the population of Germany itself. By the end, Germany had long since become one huge labor camp, but one blockaded from receiving adequate foodstuffs and suffering a deluge of bombs from ever-growing fleets of heavy bombers opposed by ever fewer obsolete fighters flying on their last precious drops of fuel. Tooze maintains the courage to detail fully the ultimate miseries endured by the German people themselves, refraining from the stylish indulgence of assigning blame to them for the war and its ineluctably mounting ferocity.

This work is magisterial. The author, a British national born in 1967, was raised both in England and in Heidelberg. While his degrees in economics and history come from British institutions, he also studied for two years at the Free University of Berlin, and is obviously fully bilingual. His book is sold both in its original English and in German translation in Germany. While the German version was written by a professional translator, it contains in its front matter the legend (in German), "This translation has been thoroughly reviewed by the author," a valuable reassurance to have for a work of such technical nuance where the author speaks the target language. The sources cited in the footnotes appear to be about evenly divided between English-language ones and German-language.

The book is uncannily well edited. In the 676 pages of its text, I noted one, single typographical error (on Page 496), that one being something a spell-checker would not have caught. Statistical tables and footnotes contain further spelling, diction, and even editorial glitches, but none that distort meaning or frustrate understanding. The footnotes and chapter headings are arranged in a traditional fashion that seriously impairs facility of following footnotes, a misfortune affecting access to a grand total of 2,088 footnotes, many of considerable explanatory value. Another artifact of this anachronism is that the book contains no alphabetized list of sources, making it difficult, for example, to confirm that the author avoided all references to David Irving, who has written authoritatively on many subjects treated by Tooze, and whose personal history even happens in a few basic ways to resemble those of the younger man.

On the strength of this work, Tooze faces no danger whatsoever of its publication in Germany falling foul of the Holocaust-denial laws that ultimately landed Irving in an Austrian jail—his affirmation of the horror, if not the crime, of the Holocaust is fulsome. On the other hand, he also makes it abundantly clear that the exigencies of the wars Germany had to fight made mass death from hunger and hunger-related diseases utterly unavoidable, and renders the awareness that a Holocaust had to happen to some large group quite explicit; the impression that Germany practically "couldn't help" something much like the Holocaust seems to lie only one short step beyond the point to which this narrative takes the attentive reader.

While Tooze's other works do not examine the causes, effects, and contexts of the Holocaust in anything like the depth that this work must, and does, it is fascinating to note that Cambridge University, at which

Tooze taught until he moved to Yale in 2009, has hosted on its Web site a lecture given by the professor in 2008 titled “New Perspectives on the Holocaust.” The entire one-hour lecture was videotaped and evidently at some point was available for download in four parts, still to be seen at <http://www.historycambridge.com/default.asp?contentID=926>. But all my efforts to actually view this lecture have been met with a blank screen. Just what this lecture might have contained, and why it is now so mysteriously unavailable, one can best imagine only after reading *The Wages of Destruction*. And that, in turn, will count among the lesser of the many rewards to be had from the reading.

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